

Centaurea

Centaurea cyanus (cornflower) is an annual wildflower native to Europe, historically found in grain fields and known for its vibrant blue, thistle-like flowers, though it also appears in pink, purple, and white. Also called bachelor's button or bluebottle, it is a popular, easily grown cottage garden plant that attracts pollinators and is used in floral arrangements. The name *Centaurea* is derived from the centaur Chiron in Greek mythology, who used the plant to heal a wound. The species name *cyanus* comes from a youth named Cyanus, who adored the plant, or the nymph Cyane. It is a traditional symbol in many European cultures and is often associated with memory. The cornflower (*Centaurea cyanus*) is a significant symbol in English and European culture, traditionally representing hope, love, fertility, and refined delicacy. Historically, it was known as a "bachelor's button" in England, worn by young men to signify their eligibility for marriage or the hope of a returned love.

Est

"The gentle things remind us we can be gentle too."

The rain had softened to a whisper.

My hands were steady now, wrapped around a third cup—cornflower this time, the blue-violet liquid strange and beautiful. I'd never known flowers could become this. Could become something you drank, something that warmed you from the inside out. The taste was subtle, almost grassy, with a sweetness that felt like it belonged in a garden rather than a kitchen.

Lego had moved from the floor to the couch, curled into the corner like one of his own plushies. His legs were tucked beneath him, his arms wrapped loosely around a bear that was almost as big as his torso. The professional polish from the photoshoot was completely gone now—no rhinestones, no styled hair, no careful blankness for the cameras.

Just a boy in soft clothes, holding a stuffed animal, existing quietly in his own space.

Silence, but comfortable. The kind you share with someone who doesn't need you to perform. I wasn't used to this. To being in a stranger's home without the pressure of conversation, without the need to fill every pause with words. Usually silence made me anxious—made me feel like I was failing some unspoken social test. But here, surrounded by soft things and the lingering scent of flower tea, the quiet felt... safe.

Like breathing. Like the world had finally stopped asking me to be something.

Outside, the rain continued its gentle percussion against the windows. The city lights beyond the glass were blurred, impressionist, turning Bangkok into a watercolor version of itself. I watched the drops trace paths down the pane, each one following its own route, and thought about how I'd ended up here.

An hour ago, I'd been falling apart in a supermarket parking lot. Now I was drinking flower tea with a boy I barely knew, and somehow that made perfect sense.

"I saw my parents today, At the supermarket," I continued. "I was just... buying groceries. Trying to do something normal. And they were there." The words came out before I'd decided to say them. Quiet. Matter-of-fact. Like I was reporting something that had happened to someone else.

Lego looked up from his bear. His eyes were attentive but not demanding—the expression of someone who would listen without requiring you to explain yourself.

"They pretended I didn't exist." I said it simply. No embellishment, no drama. Just the truth, laid out between us like a playing card face-up on a table.

Lego didn't gasp or offer immediate comfort or ask the obvious questions. He just nodded, slow and understanding, like this was a language he spoke fluently. "Mine do that too," he said. "Every day."

I looked at him—really looked. At the softness of his expression, the steadiness in his gaze. At the way he'd said it without bitterness or self-pity, just acknowledgment.

We sat with that for a moment. Two people who understood something without needing it explained. The understanding that passed between us needed no words. It was the recognition of a shared experience, a mutual scar. Different in detail but identical in weight—the particular heaviness of being unseen by the people who were supposed to see you first.

I set down my tea and looked at the pink snail beside me. Momo, with its embroidered smile and drooping antenna. It seemed to be watching me with patient, button-eyed kindness.

"You said your sister gave you this," I said. "Momo."

Lego's brightness dimmed, just slightly. Not extinguished—more like a lamp turned down, the light still there but softer. More vulnerable.

"She collected snails," he said. "Real ones, when she was little. She had a whole terrarium in her room. Different species, different shells. She'd spend hours watching them move, drawing them in her notebooks."

His fingers traced patterns on the bear's fur as he spoke, a self-soothing gesture that seemed unconscious.

"She couldn't go outside much—her heart—so she brought the slow things inside where she could watch them. She said she liked that they carried their homes with them. That no matter where they went, they were already safe."

I stayed quiet, letting him find his own pace. The rain outside had eased further, barely more than a mist now, but the sky remained gray.

"She died when I was thirteen," Lego continued. His voice was steady, practiced—like this was a story he'd told himself so many times it had worn smooth. "Heart defect. She was seventeen. They knew it was coming, eventually. But knowing didn't make it easier."

"I'm sorry."

The words felt inadequate. They always did. But Lego just nodded, accepting them for what they were—not a fix, just an acknowledgment.

"After she died, my parents couldn't look at me anymore." He said it simply, without accusation. Like he was describing weather. "I reminded them of her. Of everything they couldn't fix. So they stopped trying."

The parallel to my own story was so clear it almost hurt. Different mechanisms, same result. Est through rejection, Lego through loss and the abandonment that followed.

"The divorce happened six months later," he added. "They couldn't stay in the same house with all the memories. And they couldn't stay with me either. Too much reminder of everything that went wrong."

His hand moved to Momo's shell, touching it gently.

"She gave me this the week before she died. Said she wanted me to remember that slow things could still be beautiful. That just because something moved carefully didn't mean it wasn't going somewhere important."

I looked at the snail with new eyes. Not just a plushie anymore. A piece of someone who was gone. A reminder to move slowly and still matter.

"She sounds like she was wise." I said.

"She was." Lego's smile was sad but real. "She had to be. When you know you might not have much time, you learn what's important faster than other people."

The silence that followed was heavy with understanding. I thought about my own timeline—not threatened by illness, but disrupted just the same. The years I'd lost to survival mode. The parts of myself I'd buried to get through each day.

"My parents found something on my computer," I said eventually. The words came easier now, loosened by his honesty. "Private things. Things that made them realize I wasn't the son they'd planned for."

Lego's expression didn't change. No shock, no judgment. Just listening.

"My father, He just... decided. Said 'get out' like he was canceling a subscription. And my mother stood there and watched and didn't say a word."

I could still see her face. The careful blankness. The deliberate choice not to intervene.

"That was six years ago. I've seen them maybe three times since then. Always by accident. And every time, they do the same thing—look right through me. Like the person they kicked out was someone else's problem. Like I stopped existing the moment the door closed behind me."

"Today, at the supermarket," I continued, "my mother's eyes met mine. Just for a second. And she stepped back. Turned away. Chose not to see me, the same way she chose not to speak six years ago."

Lego nodded slowly. "That might be worse than anger," he said. "At least anger means you still matter. Being invisible means you've been erased."

Yes. That was exactly it. The word I hadn't been able to find.

Erased.

"My parents send money," Lego said quietly. "Every month. More than I need, honestly. Enough for this apartment, for school, for everything. But they haven't called in two years. Haven't visited in four. They have new families now. New spouses, new children. Kids who aren't haunted by their dead daughter's ghost." His voice was matter-of-fact, but I heard the hairline fractures beneath it. "I'm the leftover from the old life. The reminder of everything that fell apart. So they pay me to stay away and pretend that's the same as caring."

Two different flavors of the same abandonment. His parents paid to maintain distance; mine simply pretended the distance didn't exist. But the result was identical: children made invisible by the people who should have seen them most clearly.

"The money makes it complicated," Lego added. "Because I can't hate them completely. They're keeping me alive. They're just not... present. And sometimes I don't know which is worse—being rejected outright or being maintained like a problem that's been solved."

I understood that too. The guilt that came with complicated feelings. The inability to cleanly categorize your pain when the people who caused it weren't entirely villains.

"At least you know where you stand," Lego said, and there was something almost like envy in his voice. "They rejected you. It's clear. With me, it's all... suspended. Like they might come back someday, might suddenly remember they have a son. So I can't fully grieve. Can't fully move on. Just keep waiting for a phone call that

never comes."

The bear in his arms seemed to sag with him, sharing his exhaustion. We sat with that for a while. Two people who understood being unseen. Two people who'd learned to carry weight that wasn't theirs to carry.

The question had been building in me since the flower shop. Since I'd noticed the shadows under his eyes, the flinch when I mentioned William hurting him. Since I'd watched him perform brightness on the studio set like it was a skill he'd mastered through repetition.

"How do you do it?" I asked. "Smile all the time? After everything?"

Lego's smile wavered. Not disappeared—he was too practiced for that—but shifted. The performance giving way, just slightly, to the performer beneath. For the first time, I saw it for what it was. Not denial. Not naivety. Not the simple cheerfulness of someone who hadn't experienced pain.

Decision.

"Practice," he said. His voice was quiet but steady. "Years of practice." He uncurled slightly, the bear shifting in his lap. "If I stop smiling, I have to feel what's underneath. And sometimes what's underneath is too heavy to carry while standing. So I keep the smile like... like armor. Like if I look happy enough, I can trick myself into believing it's true."

I recognized every word. Had lived them myself, in different clothes.

"So I keep moving," he continued. "The flower shop. Modeling. Dancing. School. If I'm busy enough, I don't have time to collapse. If I'm always doing something for someone else, I don't have to sit still with my own thoughts."

"That worked for me too," I said slowly. "Until it didn't."

Lego's eyes met mine. For the first time, the brightness was completely absent—not hidden, just set aside. What remained was something more real. More tired. More human.

"I know," he said. "I'm scared of that. Of what happens when I stop."

The admission hung in the air between us. Brave and small and exactly the kind of thing you could only say in a room full of soft things, surrounded by the evidence that someone had tried to build a fortress against the world's sharp edges.

"I kept running until I couldn't anymore," I told him. "Until the thing I was running from caught up with me and I fell apart completely. Ended up drunk on someone's doorstep at three in the morning, throwing up while the person I thought I loved watched me break down."

The memory was still raw. Humiliating. But saying it out loud made it smaller somehow. Less like a secret and more like just... a thing that had happened. A thing I was surviving.

"The breakdown wasn't the worst part," I continued. "The worst part was realizing I'd been hollow for years and hadn't even noticed. So busy performing 'fine' that I forgot what actually being fine felt like."

Lego was quiet, absorbing this. His fingers traced circles on the bear's fur, around and around, a meditation in motion.

"How did you stop?" he asked finally. "How did you learn to... just be?"

I thought about the question carefully. About Dr. Siriporn and her patient observations. About Tui's steady presence. About the resurrection plant on my windowsill, unfurling one cell at a time.

"I started therapy a few weeks ago," I said. "It's... not what I expected. Not dramatic. No breakthrough moments or sudden revelations. Just... someone helping me see the patterns I couldn't see myself."

"Is it helping?"

"I think so." I looked at my hands, steady now around the cooling tea. "I didn't realize how dry I was until someone started adding water. I'd been surviving for so long that I forgot surviving wasn't the same as living. Therapy is teaching me the difference."

The metaphor felt right. The resurrection plant, dormant and curled and appearing dead, but really just waiting for the right conditions to unfurl. That was me. That was what I was learning to do.

Lego was quiet for a long moment, processing. I watched him thinking—could see the gears turning behind his eyes, the consideration happening in real time.

Then, quietly: "Maybe I need water too."

"Maybe you do."

We sat with that. The admission, once spoken, seemed to fill the room—not with heaviness, but with the particular lightness that comes from finally saying something true.

The rain had stopped completely now. Outside the window, the city was glittering, washed clean by the storm. The clouds were beginning to break, and through the gaps I could see the deep purple of an evening sky just starting to show its stars.

My phone buzzed against the coffee table, interrupting the quiet.

A message from Tui: Where are you? Are you okay?

I considered how to answer. Considered the complicated web of explanations—the supermarket, my parents, the breakdown, Lego's unexpected rescue. The fact that I was sitting in a stranger's apartment surrounded by stuffed animals, drinking flower tea and talking about trauma like it was the most natural thing in the world.

In the end, I kept it simple.

I'm at Lego's. We're okay. Both of us.

Three dots appeared. Disappeared. Appeared again. Tui was typing something, probably several versions, trying to find the right words.

I looked up at Lego, who was watching the flowers on his terrace. His expression was unreadable—somewhere between thoughtful and sad, with a soft undercurrent of something that might have been hope.

"Tui's worried about you." I said.

Lego's smile returned, but softer now. More real. Not the bright performance I'd seen at the studio, but something closer to the surface.

"He always is," he said. "He just doesn't know what to do about it."

There was a weight in those words. A history I was only beginning to understand—conversations that hadn't happened, feelings that hadn't been spoken, a distance maintained by fear rather than lack of caring.

"Maybe he needs to figure that out." I said.

"Maybe." A pause. Lego's eyes stayed on the terrace, on the flowers still dripping from the rain. "Or maybe I need to stop waiting for him to."

The admission was quiet. Not bitter—more like tired. Like someone who had been holding their breath and was only now considering what it might feel like to exhale.

Tui's reply finally came through: Thank you for being there. For him. For both of you.

I read it twice. Felt the complicated emotions beneath the simple words—relief that Lego wasn't alone, worry about what had led to this, maybe something else too. Something Tui probably wouldn't admit to himself.

I didn't reply yet. Just set the phone face-down on the table and returned my attention to the boy across from me, who was still watching his garden like it held answers.

"Can I ask you something?" I said. "About all this?"

I gestured broadly at the apartment—the stuffed animals, the soft furnishings, the general impression of a space designed for comfort above all else.

Lego's attention returned from the terrace. "Ask."

"Why so many? The stuffed animals, I mean. It's not just decoration, is it?"

He considered the question seriously, like it deserved real thought rather than a quick deflection.

"The world has a lot of sharp edges," he said finally. His voice was thoughtful, measured. "People say things that cut. They leave without warning. They look through you like you're not even there."

His hand moved to the bear in his lap, stroking its fur absently.

"These—" he gestured to the bears, the cats, the smiling snail, the whole soft ecosystem around us— "they don't leave. They don't hurt. They don't look at you with disappointment or confusion or nothing at all."

He pulled the bear closer, tucking it against his chest like a shield.

"When everything else gets too hard, I come back here and remember that gentle things exist. That the world isn't only sharp edges. That sometimes softness survives."

I looked around the room with new understanding. Not clutter. Not childish decoration. A fortress. A carefully constructed sanctuary against everything outside that had teeth.

"You build nests," I said. "Safe places."

"I try to." He smiled, a little wry. "It doesn't always work. But it helps to have somewhere to land when I fall."

That phrase—somewhere to land—echoed something Tui had said once. About being solid ground. About being the place people came back to when the storms passed.

"You did this for William too," I said, realizing. "Didn't you?"

Lego nodded slowly. "His apartment was empty when I started visiting. Just canvases and paint and these horrible expensive white walls. It felt like a hospital. Like somewhere you went to be sick, not somewhere you lived."

He pulled his legs up closer, making himself smaller on the couch.

"So I brought him things. The sunflowers for his counter—they're his mother's favorite. Were his mother's favorite. The soft blanket he never uses but won't throw

away. Small things that made it feel like someone actually lived there instead of just... existing."

"You were trying to make him a fortress too."

Lego considered this. "Maybe. Or maybe I was just trying to keep us both from disappearing. He was the only person who understood what it felt like—losing someone and having everyone else move on while you stayed stuck. I couldn't save my sister or my parents. But I thought maybe I could save him. Could save us both by refusing to let either of us vanish."

The weight of that—the responsibility he'd taken on at sixteen, seventeen, alone in the city with only a grieving recluse for company—settled over me like a heavy blanket.

"That's a lot to carry," I said quietly.

"Someone had to."

"Did they?"

Lego looked at me, surprised by the question. "What do you mean?"

"I mean—did someone have to? Or did you just decide that it had to be you because no one else was stepping up?"

The question sat between us. Lego's expression shifted, something flickering behind his eyes that he quickly tucked away.

"Maybe both," he admitted. "Maybe I needed to be useful to feel like I deserved to exist. And he needed someone. So it worked."

"Until it didn't work anymore. Until you started running out of water yourself."

He didn't respond to that. Just looked down at the bear in his lap, at its worn fur and patient button eyes. I knew I was stepping into sensitive territory. But something about this conversation—the honesty of it, the safety of this soft space—made the words easier to find.

"Can I ask about Tui?"

Lego's brightness flickered. Not extinguished, but dimmed. A candle in a sudden breeze.

"What about him?"

"I've seen the way he watches you," I said carefully. "The way he talks about you. And I've seen the way you try not to react when his name comes up."

Lego was quiet for a long moment. Then, softly:

"He sees me as someone to protect. Someone young and fragile who needs to be kept safe from the world. From him, especially."

"And you? How do you see him?"

The smile that crossed his face was complicated. Sad and hopeful and resigned all at once.

"I see him as the first person in years who made me feel like I could stop pretending." His voice was barely above a whisper. "Like I could be tired in front of someone and they wouldn't leave. Wouldn't decide I was too much trouble. Wouldn't just... maintain me from a distance like my parents do."

"But he's keeping his distance anyway."

"Because he thinks he'll break me." Lego's fingers traced patterns on the bear's fur, around and around. "Because someone broke him once, and he doesn't trust himself not to do the same to me. He thinks staying away is the kindest thing he can do."

The parallel to William and me was so clear it almost hurt. People so afraid of their own damage that they pushed away the ones who saw them clearly. Building walls not out of cruelty but out of misguided protection. Keeping love at arm's length because the idea of letting it in was terrifying.

"He's not the only one," I said. "I spent months chasing someone who couldn't let me in. Convinced myself that if I was just patient enough, persistent enough, I could love him into being ready."

"William."

"Yeah." I took a breath. "And I kept chasing him because at least a storm feels like something. At least it's not the quiet of being alone. The chaos of wanting someone who can't want you back—it hurts, but at least it's not numb."

Lego considered this. His expression was thoughtful, like he was seeing something in my words that applied to his own situation.

"Tui isn't a storm," he said finally. "He's the opposite."

"Solid ground."

"Yes." The word came out with a sigh. "And I don't know how to trust that. The solid things in my life kept crumbling. My sister, who was supposed to be there forever. My parents, who were supposed to love me unconditionally. My home, which was supposed to be safe."

His voice cracked slightly on the last word, but he pushed through.

"Every time I've believed in something stable, it's collapsed beneath me. So now there's this person who actually wants to be solid ground—who actually might stay—and I can't stop waiting for him to crumble too."

"What if he doesn't?"

The question hung in the air. No answer came—just the silence of someone considering a possibility they'd been afraid to hope for.

My therapist's voice echoed in my head. The pattern of chasing storms. The addiction to chaos that masked a deeper fear of being truly known.

"You know what Dr. Siriporn told me?" I said. "That I was addicted to storms. To people who were beautiful and chaotic and impossible to hold. That I kept choosing them because they couldn't ask me to be real."

Lego tilted his head, listening.

"If someone is a storm, you can focus all your energy on surviving them. On navigating their chaos, adapting to their moods, making yourself small enough to fit in the spaces they leave. You never have to think about what you want because you're too busy managing what they need."

"That sounds exhausting."

"It was. But it was also safe, in a weird way. Because storms don't ask you to be vulnerable. They just ask you to endure. And I was really, really good at enduring."

I looked at him—at this boy who had been enduring longer than I had, in his own way. Building fortresses of soft things. Smiling through his own exhaustion. Carrying people who didn't see how heavy they were.

"The thing about solid ground," I continued, "is that it asks you to put down roots. To actually be present. To trust that the surface won't shift beneath you. And that's terrifying when every foundation you've ever known has collapsed."

Lego's eyes were wet. Not crying exactly—just full. Like the words had touched something that had been waiting to be acknowledged.

"I don't know how to put down roots," he said quietly. "I've been running for so long. Even when I'm standing still, I'm running."

"Maybe that's what the water is for," I said. "To help you stop."

The evening had deepened while we talked. The sky beyond the window was fully dark now, dotted with the scattered lights of a city that never quite slept. The terrace flowers were silhouettes against the glow. I thought about the resurrection

plant on my desk. About the careful work of becoming alive again. About the fact that healing wasn't a straight line, wasn't a dramatic transformation, was just the slow accumulation of small choices made over and over.

"I'm going to keep coming back," I said. "To check on you. Is that okay?"

Lego's surprise was genuine. The mask dropped completely for a moment, revealing something raw and hopeful beneath. "You barely know me."

"I know you pulled me out of the rain when you didn't have to. I know you made me tea and didn't ask a single question. I know you gave me shelter without expecting anything in return."

I met his eyes directly.

"I know you've been carrying people who don't see how heavy you are. And I know what it's like to carry that weight and pretend it doesn't hurt."

The brightness that returned to his face was different now. Warmer. Less performed. Like a flame that had stopped flickering and found its steady glow.

"That's... a lot to notice."

"I'm a photographer." I smiled, and meant it. "Noticing is what I do."

A pause stretched between us—not awkward, just full. The kind of pause where things settled into place, where understanding didn't need to be spoken aloud.

Then Lego smiled. Really smiled, the first one that felt completely real. Not the brightness he wore for protection, not the cheerfulness that kept people from looking too closely. Just a genuine expression of something like joy.

"Okay," he said. "Come back. I'll make you more tea."

I saw it then—what Tui was too afraid to see. What William had probably never looked closely enough to notice.

Lego wasn't fragile. He'd been carrying everyone's weight for years—his own grief, his parents' absence, William's isolation, the expectations of everyone who saw his brightness and assumed it meant he didn't hurt. He'd been doing it alone, without complaint, without asking for help, without letting anyone see the cost.

He wasn't someone who needed protection. He was someone who needed partnership. Someone to carry weight with him instead of adding to it. Someone who saw the load he was bearing and said "let me help" instead of "let me save you."

I didn't say any of this. But I thought it. And I filed it away for later—for the next time I talked to Tui, for the next time I could find the right words to explain what I

was seeing.

Some observations needed to be delivered gently. Some truths needed to be planted like seeds and given time to grow.

When I finally stood to leave, the apartment felt different than it had when I arrived. Warmer somehow, despite the night air. Like the walls themselves had relaxed, had decided I was someone who could be trusted in this space.

Lego walked me to the door, padding quietly on bare feet. At the threshold, he paused, then disappeared for a moment into what I assumed was the kitchen.

He returned carrying a box. It was beautiful—decorated with pressed flowers, sealed with a ribbon that matched the purple of the snail's shell. Inside, I could see small packets and glass jars, carefully labeled. Teas. A whole collection of them.

"For your resurrection," he said, handing it to me. "Different flowers for different days. The rose petal one is good for sadness. The chamomile is good for sleep. And the cornflower—" he smiled, remembering what we'd shared— "is good for hope."

I took the box carefully, like it was something precious. Because it was.

"Thank you." I said. The words felt insufficient, but they were what I had.

"Call if you need to talk," Lego added. "I mean it. Two in the morning, whenever. I'm usually awake anyway."

"That doesn't sound healthy."

"Probably not." His smile was wry. "But it means I'm available."

I laughed—a real laugh, the kind that surprised me with its ease. "I'll call. But you should sleep sometimes."

"I'll try." He opened the door, letting in the cool night air. "Get home safe, P'Est."

I stepped into the hallway, the box of tea cradled against my chest. Behind me, I heard the soft click of the door closing—not a dismissal, just a completion. The end of one thing and the beginning of something else.

The bus ride home was quiet.

The rain had left everything clean, the streets reflecting the city lights in rippling pools. I sat by the window with Lego's box in my lap, watching the familiar landmarks pass—the bridge, the market that was closed this time of night, the intersection where I always transferred.

My phone buzzed. A message from Tui, finally.

Tui: Is he really okay?

I thought about Lego's brightness, and the exhaustion beneath it. About the way he'd carried so much for so long without anyone noticing. About the fortress of soft things he'd built against a world that had given him so many reasons to armor himself.

He's getting there, I typed back. But he needs someone to see him. Really see him.

Another pause. Then:

Tui: I'm trying.

Me: Try harder, Stop protecting him from yourself. He's stronger than you think.

The three dots appeared. Disappeared. Appeared again.

No reply for a long time. Long enough that I was almost home, climbing off the bus and walking the familiar route to my building. Long enough that I'd unlocked my door, set down Lego's box, and found my resurrection plant on the windowsill, a little greener than yesterday.

Then, finally:

Tui: I know. That's what scares me.

I read the words twice. Felt the weight of them—the admission behind the admission. Tui wasn't scared of Lego being fragile. He was scared of Lego being strong enough to handle him. Strong enough to stay. Strong enough to see all of Tui's own cracks and choose not to leave. That was the real fear. Not breaking someone else—being seen by someone who wouldn't be broken.

I set the phone down and looked at my plant. At its unfurling leaves, green and alive. At the evidence that something that had looked dead could learn to live again.

Then I went to the kitchen and started unpacking groceries I'd forgotten I was still carrying. The ice cream had melted slightly, but it was still cold enough to salvage. The vegetables were fine. The basics I'd bought for my kitchen—oil and vinegar and rice noodles—found their places on the shelves.

Small things. Practical things. The quiet work of building a life.

When I finally went to bed, the box of flower tea was on my nightstand. A reminder that gentleness existed. That someone I barely knew had seen me falling apart and offered shelter without questions. Tomorrow, I'd call Dr. Siriporn. I'd tell her about my parents, about the supermarket, about the particular pain of being erased. I'd tell her about Lego too—about the fortress of soft things and the brightness that was both shield and burden.

But tonight, I just slept. And for the first time in a long time, I didn't dream about storms.

"Some apologies arrive like storms—beautiful and devastating, asking you to decide if you want to stand in the rain"

The bus swayed gently through the afternoon traffic, carrying me home through streets I'd memorized without meaning to. My backpack sat heavy on my lap, equipment bag wedged between my feet, both full of the day's work. The outdoor shoot had gone well—better than well, actually. The light had cooperated, the models had been present and engaged, and somewhere in my memory cards were images I was genuinely proud of.

I was tired, but it was a good kind of tired. The kind that came from work well done, from hours spent doing something I loved, from the particular satisfaction of knowing that today's images would be beautiful. The outdoor shoot had been everything I'd hoped for—Songkran preparations in full swing, the energy of the festival beginning to build, colors and water and joy that would translate perfectly into the campaign we were creating.

Lego had been there.

Not nervous this time, not hiding behind the professional blankness I'd seen at the indoor session. This time he'd moved through the shoots with a particular grace, his natural hair catching sunlight, his smile genuine in ways the camera loved. I'd watched him between takes, seen the way he checked his phone and softened at whatever he read there.

Tui's name on the screen, probably.

They'd clearly worked things out. I didn't know the details yet—hadn't asked, because some conversations needed their own time—but the evidence was unmistakable. Something had shifted between them. The careful distance I'd observed at the studio, the tension that had crackled whenever they occupied the same space, had given way to something warmer. Something that looked like the beginning of something real. They'd worked things out. Somehow, in the weeks since that rainy afternoon, Tui had found the courage to be honest, and Lego had found the courage to trust him, and together they'd built something that looked like it might actually last.

I was happy for them.

The thought arrived simply, without the complicated tangle of jealousy or comparison I might have expected months ago. Just genuine, uncomplicated happiness for two people who deserved good things happening to them. Maybe that was healing too. Maybe that was what it looked like when you stopped measuring your own worth against other people's victories.

The city scrolled past my window—temples and shopping centers, street vendors and gleaming towers, Bangkok's eternal contradiction displaying itself in fragments. The sun was shining today, warm and insistent, the kind of brightness that felt like permission after so many gray days. My mind drifted backward, the way it did on long bus rides, settling into memories I'd been turning over like stones.

The rainy day at Lego's apartment felt like it had happened both yesterday and a lifetime ago.

The words echoed in my mind, as they had been doing for weeks now. Ever since that gray, rainy day when everything had changed.

I thought about it often—too often, maybe. The supermarket. My mother's face. The small step back she'd taken, the deliberate turn of her head, the calculated nothing that had confirmed everything I'd always feared and suspected. She had seen me, and she had chosen to look away. Not because she didn't recognize her own son, but because she did.

That should have destroyed me.

For years, I'd been afraid of exactly this moment. The accidental encounter, the forced acknowledgment, the confrontation with parents who had erased me from their lives with the same casual efficiency they might have used to cancel a subscription or return an unwanted gift. I'd imagined it happening a thousand different ways—in grocery stores, on street corners, at restaurants, in any of the countless public spaces where strangers became un-strangers in an instant.

And when it finally happened, when the moment I'd dreaded for so long arrived without warning in the fluorescent aisles of a supermarket I'd never been to before—I had survived.

Not gracefully. Not easily. Not without tears and trembling and the kind of spiral that used to consume me for days. But I had survived, because in the moment when I was falling apart, someone had appeared with an umbrella and a gentle voice and the simple offer of shelter.

Lego. I still didn't fully understand why he'd done it. We weren't close—hadn't been, anyway, not then. We existed in each other's orbits through the gravitational pull of other people: Tui, Hong, the complicated web of connections that had formed around William's breakdown and my subsequent healing. We'd talked twice, maybe three times, before that rainy afternoon. Brief conversations, surface-level exchanges, the kind of interactions that don't usually lead to someone dragging you through a parking lot and feeding you cookies in an apartment full of teddy bears. But Lego had done it anyway.

He'd seen me falling apart—really seen me, in a way my mother had refused to—and instead of looking away, he'd moved closer. Had taken my arm. Had pulled me

toward shelter.

I could still smell the flower tea, still feel the softness of his couch cushions, still see the stuffed animals watching with their patient button eyes. The particular sanctuary he'd built against a world that had given him so many reasons to armor himself. We'd talked for hours. About parents who pretended their children didn't exist. About the particular weight of being erased by the people who should have seen you first. About his sister, who had loved snails and understood that carrying your home with you meant you could never really be lost.

"Snails carry their homes with them, so they're never really lost."

The words had lodged somewhere deep in my chest, taking root like seeds in unexpected soil. Two people who understood abandonment, sitting in a room full of soft things, recognizing each other's wounds without needing to name them all. Before I'd left that night, Lego had pressed a box of teas into my hands. Different flowers for different days, he'd explained. Rose petal for sadness. Chamomile for sleep. Cornflower for hope.

I'd been drinking them every morning since, watching the flowers unfurl in hot water, learning to start each day with something gentle instead of the aggressive caffeine that had fueled my survival mode for years.

The ice cream from my groceries that night had definitely melted by the time I got home. But the tea had survived. The connection had survived. And somehow, improbably, so had I.

My phone buzzed, pulling me out of the memory.

A message from Tui—not words, but a photograph. The bus stop sign near my apartment, familiar in its mundane specificity. The one I'd stood beneath a hundred times, waiting for exactly this bus. I stared at the image, confused.

Why was Tui sending me a picture of my bus stop?

Before I could respond, I realized the answer was approaching. Through the window, I could see the familiar intersection, the corner store, the stretch of sidewalk that led to my building.

And there, standing beside the sign from the photograph: two figures.

I grabbed my bags, pressing the stop button with my elbow, juggling phone and equipment in the particular chaos of someone who hadn't expected to be met. The bus lurched to a halt, and I managed to get off without dropping anything—barely.

Tui and Hong were waiting in the afternoon sunshine. Hong held a cardboard carrier with iced coffees, condensation beading on the plastic cups. Tui was sipping something that looked like tea, his expression caught somewhere between casual

and carefully arranged. Both of them smiled when they saw me stumbling off the bus with my bags.

"Hey." Hong said, stepping forward to offer me one of the coffees. His silver hair caught the light, and his smile was genuine in that particular way he had—no pretense, no performance.

Tui reached for my equipment bag before I could protest. "Let me get that."

"I didn't know you guys were coming." I managed, too surprised to form anything more eloquent.

"We were close." Tui said, taking a sip of his tea. His expression was innocent, unconcerned.

"That's a lie." Hong said immediately.

Tui's hand shot out, landing a playful punch on Hong's arm. "Quiet, you."

"What?" Hong's voice was innocent, his expression anything but. "I'm just saying. We weren't close. We were at the studio, which is forty minutes from here, and you said—and I quote—'Let's go surprise Est at his bus stop because I want to make sure he's okay after the shoot.' That's not 'we were close.' That's—"

"Details."

I looked between them—Tui with his tea and his careful casualness, Hong with his coffee and his refusal to maintain the fiction—and felt something bloom in my chest. Warm and unexpected and still slightly unfamiliar.

They'd come to meet me. Not because I'd asked. Not because there was an emergency. Just because they'd thought about me finishing my work, getting on a bus, coming home to an empty apartment—and they'd decided that wasn't acceptable. They'd decided to show up.

This was what it felt like to have people who cared about you. This was what it looked like when your existence mattered to someone, when your wellbeing was worth a forty-minute journey across the city, when the people in your life showed up not because they had to but because they wanted to.

My parents had seen me and looked away.

Tui and Hong had come across the city to meet me at a bus stop.

The contrast was so stark, so obvious, that I felt something catch in my throat—not quite tears, not quite laughter, but something in between. Something that felt like gratitude and grief all tangled together, the particular ache of realizing what you'd been missing now that you'd finally found it.

The walk to my apartment was short—only about ten minutes from the bus stop—but somehow it stretched to fill the entire afternoon. We walked slowly, Hong occasionally stopping to photograph something with his phone "for reference," he claimed, though I suspected at least half the images were just things he found aesthetically pleasing, Tui carrying my bag like it was the most natural thing in the world. The cold coffee Hong had given me was perfect—sweet enough to be indulgent, cold enough to be refreshing, exactly what I'd needed without knowing I'd needed it.

"The shoot went well?" Tui asked.

"Really well." I took a sip of coffee, organizing my thoughts. "The outdoor locations were perfect. The festival energy is already building—and the team managed to incorporate that into some of the shots. Natural, you know? Authentic."

"Lego looked good?" There was something in Tui's voice—a particular attention, a careful casualness—that told me this wasn't just a professional inquiry. He wanted to know how Lego had seemed. Whether he'd been okay. Whether the exhaustion that Tui probably noticed more than anyone was visible through the makeup and the styling.

"He looked beautiful," I said honestly. "But also... happy? More relaxed than I've seen him at previous shoots. Less like he was performing and more like he was just... being."

Tui's expression softened. Something in his shoulders loosened, some tension I hadn't noticed until it was gone.

"Good," he said quietly. "That's good."

Hong caught my eye and made a face that clearly communicated look at these two idiots finally figuring it out. I bit my lip to keep from laughing.

"So," I said, deciding to address the elephant directly, "you two worked things out? You and Lego?"

Tui almost stumbled over his own feet. His ears went pink—that telltale flush that apparently afflicted him whenever Lego was mentioned in emotional contexts.

"We're... yeah." He cleared his throat. "We talked. Really talked, for the first time. About everything. About what I was afraid of, about what he was afraid of, about all the ways we'd both been circling around the truth for months."

"And?"

"And..." Tui's smile was soft, private, the kind of expression that was meant for remembering rather than sharing. "And we're trying. Taking it slow. Figuring out what this is and what it can be. But we're doing it together, instead of dancing

around each other and pretending we don't feel what we feel."

"Finally." Hong muttered.

Tui shot him a look. "I didn't hear you being particularly brave about your own romantic life."

"We're not talking about my romantic life."

"We could be."

"We're not."

I watched their exchange with amusement and something warmer—affection, I realized. The particular fondness that came from knowing people well enough to appreciate their quirks, their patterns, the specific ways they annoyed and delighted each other. This was what friendship looked like. This was what chosen family felt like. Not the absence of conflict, but the presence of care that made conflict safe.

"What about you?" Tui asked, turning back to me. "How are you doing? Really?"

The question was genuine—I could hear it in his voice, see it in his expression. He wasn't asking for small talk. He was asking because he wanted to know, because my answer mattered, because my wellbeing was something he'd apparently crossed the city to check on.

"I'm..." I considered the question seriously, taking inventory of myself the way Dr. Siriporn had taught me. Body: tired but healthy. Mind: clearer than it had been in months. Heart: still healing, still tender in places, but no longer bleeding. "I'm good, actually. Really good."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." I nodded, surprising myself with how true it felt. "The work is going well. Therapy is helping—really helping, not just the kind of helping where you say you're fine but you're not. I'm sleeping better. Eating actual food instead of whatever I can order at 2 AM. I watered my resurrection plant this morning and it's got three new leaves."

"The resurrection plant," Hong said. "That's the one Lego gave you, right? The desert thing that comes back to life?"

"Yeah." I smiled at the memory—Lego in the flower shop, explaining the symbolism with that particular earnestness he had, pressing the strange dried specimen into my hands like he was giving me a secret. "It looked completely dead when I got it. Brown and curled up, like something you'd throw away. But I've been watering it, and it's... it's remembering how to be green again."

The metaphor hung in the air between us, obvious and unsubtle but no less true for that. I was the resurrection plant. I was the dead-looking thing that had been given water and was slowly, patiently, unfurling back into life.

"That's good, Est." Tui's voice was warm. "That's really good."

My apartment felt different with people in it. Hong entered with complete confidence, like he'd been here a hundred times instead of never. He dropped his backpack on my table and started unpacking—brown paper bags that clearly contained food, containers that smelled like something delicious, the particular evidence of someone who had planned this visit in advance.

Hong had wandered over to my desk, examining the resurrection plant with obvious curiosity. "This is it? The dead thing that came back to life?"

"That's it."

He leaned closer, studying the delicate leaves that had unfurled over the past weeks. "It's actually kind of beautiful. In a strange way."

"That's what Lego said." I smiled at the memory.

"We brought lunch," he announced unnecessarily, arranging containers with the efficiency of someone accustomed to feeding people. "Or late lunch. Whatever this counts as."

"Early dinner." Tui suggested, settling onto my couch with his tea.

"Time is a construct."

They'd brought enough food for twice our number—rice and vegetables and some kind of curry that made my whole apartment smell like a proper home. We spread everything across my small table, the containers crowding together, and ate while we talked.

Hong was nervous about the exhibition. That was clear beneath his usual dry deflection, the careful jokes that kept real emotion at arm's length. Two weeks until his paintings would be displayed for gallery owners and art enthusiasts and everyone who mattered in the world he was trying to enter. Three paintings. His work, standing alone, asking to be judged on its own merits.

"It's terrifying," he admitted, pushing rice around his container. "But also exciting? I don't know. Mostly terrifying."

"You've shown work before." I pointed out.

"Not like this. This is different." His expression shifted, something vulnerable flickering across features that usually stayed composed. "This isn't designs for t-

shirts. This is... art. The real kind. The kind that doesn't hide behind commercial purpose."

The invitations he'd given us were still on my refrigerator, held in place by a magnet I'd bought specifically for them. Double tickets on heavy cardstock, the university's logo embossed in gold. I remembered the day he'd pulled them from his wallet, the particular weight of what the gesture meant.

"I brought tickets for my favorite siblings."

He'd called us family. And somehow, improbably, that's what we'd become.

"What about Nut?" Tui asked, with the careful casualness of someone fishing for information.

Hong's expression did something complicated. "What about him?"

"You've been spending time together. More than usual."

"We've been talking." Hong focused very intently on his plate. "Going out to eat. Sometimes."

"And?"

"And nothing. We're just...figuring things out." He looked up, something almost defensive in his eyes. "It's complicated."

"Everything is complicated," I said. "That doesn't mean it's not worth pursuing."

Hong considered this for a moment. Then, quietly: "He's patient. He's been patient with me in ways I probably don't deserve. And I keep waiting for that to change, for him to push for more than I can give. But he just... waits."

The parallel to other stories I knew sat heavy in the air. Patient people waiting for complicated people to feel safe enough to let them in. The particular dance of wanting and fearing, of reaching and retreating.

"Maybe that's what you need," Tui said gently. "Someone who can wait."

"Maybe." Hong's voice was soft, uncertain. "I'm still figuring that out."

Then his phone rang.

The sound cut through our conversation, pulling everyone's attention to the screen lighting up on the table. The name there made Tui's eyebrows lift.

Lego

A heart emoji beside the name. Evidence of closeness that predated whatever Tui

and Lego were building.

"I knew him before you did," Hong said, catching Tui's expression. "Don't be jealous."

"I'm not—"

He answered and pressed speakerphone before anyone could respond, Lego's voice filling my small apartment.

"Hey." The word came out soft, tired, barely more than a whisper.

"Hey," Hong replied, his tone shifting immediately from teasing to concerned. "Is something wrong?"

A pause. Then a sniff—the small, defeated sound of someone trying not to cry. "I hate not knowing how to say no."

The words landed heavy in the quiet. Hong leaned closer to the phone, as if proximity could help.

"What happened?"

"One of the dancers from my class was supposed to perform at the showcase. She can't make it—family emergency—and they asked me to take her spot. Learn her choreography. Perform in her place."

"And you said yes." Hong guessed.

"I always say yes." The frustration was sharper now, directed inward. "That's the problem. Someone asks, and my mouth just agrees before my brain catches up. Before I can think about whether I want to, or have time, or whether it's going to destroy me to add one more thing."

Tui made a soft sound—acknowledgment, recognition, the particular understanding of someone who knew this pattern intimately.

"Hi." Lego added, almost as an afterthought. Greeting whoever else might be listening.

"Est is here too." Hong said.

"Hi, P'Est."

"So what are you going to do?" The question came from Hong, gentle but direct.

Another sigh. Then something shifted in Lego's voice—frustration giving way to something almost like acceptance, tinged with the particular exhaustion of someone who had already made their decision.

"Just do the performance and pretend I want to do it. Even though I clearly don't."

"And why didn't you want to do it?"

The pause that followed was longer. Heavier. I could almost feel Lego weighing how honest to be, how much truth to offer through a phone speaker to an audience he couldn't see.

"I..." His voice cracked slightly. "I didn't want to perform until P'William could come."

The name landed like a stone in still water.

"He and his mother used to come to my performances," Lego continued, the words coming faster now, as if once started they couldn't be stopped. "When I was younger. When I first started dancing. They would sit in the front row, and she would bring flowers, and he would be so proud of me. Even when I messed up. Even when I forgot steps." His voice broke on the last words. "And now she's gone. And he can't leave his apartment. And performing feels empty. Like I'm dancing for ghosts. Like there's this space in the audience where they should be, and no one else can fill it."

The honesty of it hit me like something physical. Tui's expression had gone soft, pained, his own complicated feelings visible in the set of his jaw. Hong's hand had tightened around his phone.

Three of us, sitting in my apartment, listening to a boy confess grief he'd been carrying alone.

"This sucks," Lego said finally, his voice flattening into resignation. "I have things to do. We'll talk later. Bye, P'Tui. Bye, P'Est."

"Bye-bye," Hong said softly.

The call ended.

The silence that followed was thick with everything we couldn't say to someone who had already hung up.

"He carries so much." I said finally.

"I know." Tui's voice was rough around the edges. "I'm trying to help him carry it. But some weight—you can only stand beside someone while they bear it."

The day continued after the call.

Tui helped me clean and organize my small studio space, shifting equipment and files into better arrangements. His hands were steady and competent, moving through the work with the particular efficiency of someone who understood how to create order from chaos.

Hong, meanwhile, had claimed my couch as his personal territory. He'd kicked off his shoes, removed his jacket, and was now sprawled across the cushions with his phone in hand. Every few minutes, he'd make a small sound—a laugh, a sigh—that suggested his conversation with Nut was continuing through text.

"You're very comfortable." Tui observed, pausing to give Hong a pointed look.

"I'm emotionally exhausted from that phone call. This is self-care."

"This is avoidance."

"Same thing."

I smiled despite everything. There was something reassuring about their dynamic—the easy friction, the underlying affection. The way they could occupy the same space without it feeling crowded.

Then the doorbell rang.

"I'll get it." Hong said, surprising everyone by actually rising from the couch. He stretched elaborately before shuffling toward the door, his energy somehow both lazy and purposeful.

Tui shook his head, but he was smiling. Something fond in the expression.

I heard the door open. Heard Hong's voice, neutral:

"Supha Sangaworawong?" A different voice—deeper, unfamiliar—confirming something. The shuffle of items changing hands.

Then Hong appeared in the doorway, carrying two things.

In one hand: flowers. A bouquet unlike anything I'd seen before—exotic shapes, vibrant colors, species I couldn't identify but that spoke of expense and intention. Not the kind of arrangement you grabbed from a corner store. The kind someone chose carefully, deliberately, with specific meaning in mind.

In the other hand: a thin box. Rectangular. Wrapped simply.

"Delivery for you." Hong said, his expression carefully neutral.

I crossed the room and took them, my hands slightly unsteady. The flowers were heavier than expected—substantial, real, demanding attention. Their fragrance was subtle but present, something almost tropical.

I looked at the delivery slip.

The name there stopped my breath.

William.

William had sent me flowers.

After everything. After the obsession and the breakdown and the vomiting at his feet and the weeks of silence and therapy and the deliberate, necessary work of moving on.

William had sent me flowers.

I stood in my apartment, holding evidence that I still existed in his world. That I hadn't been forgotten. That whatever had happened between us—the passion, the pain, the particular devastation of wanting someone who couldn't want me back—had left enough of a mark for him to reach out.

The flowers were extraordinary. Exotic species I couldn't name—shapes and colors I'd never seen before, sophisticated and uncommon. The kind of arrangements that cost more than my weekly grocery budget, the kind that came from specialty florists who imported blooms from other continents. Vibrant. Expensive. Beautiful in a way that felt almost aggressive, like beauty that demanded to be acknowledged.

The kind of gift that said: I'm trying.

I looked at the box in my other hand.

"You going to open that?" Hong's voice was gentle, stripped of its usual irony.

"I don't know." But my hands were already reaching for the box cutter on my table. Already slicing through tape, already peeling back cardboard.

Inside, wrapped too carefully in fabric and bubble wrap, was a painting.

The painting was small. That was the first thing I noticed—the size of it, modest enough to fit in a box that a delivery worker could carry with one hand. Maybe twelve inches by sixteen, or thereabouts. The kind of dimensions that suggested intimacy rather than statement, private rather than exhibition-worthy.

But the detail.

God, the detail.

I held it carefully, afraid to smudge something, afraid to damage whatever William had spent hours—days? weeks?—creating. The hands were rendered with a precision that made my chest ache. Gray and blue tones, shadowed and layered, the skin textured in ways that captured not just the shape of fingers but the particular quality of living flesh. Every crease of the knuckles. Every subtle gradation where light gave way to shadow. Every microscopic imperfection that made hands look real instead of idealized.

And between those hands—between my hands, I realized with a jolt that ran through my entire body—a single red rose. The flower was the only color in the piece besides the blue-gray of the skin. It glowed against the muted palette like something sacred, like something precious being protected. The petals were rendered with the same obsessive attention as the hands themselves, each curve and fold captured with the kind of accuracy that only came from truly seeing something.

He had painted my hands holding a rose.

He had spent I-didn't-know-how-many hours studying my hands—from memory? from photographs?—and translated them into oil and pigment and canvas.

He had made something beautiful out of me.

The only color in the composition. The only warmth.

I stared at it, trying to understand what I was seeing.

I knew them—the particular shape of my fingers, the way my knuckles looked, the small scar near my thumb. William had painted my hands. Had studied them closely enough to capture every detail. Had placed between them a rose that seemed to glow against the gray. My hands. Holding something beautiful. Holding something alive.

There was a letter in the box too. An envelope, cream-colored, my name written across the front in handwriting I recognized.

I didn't open it.

Couldn't. Not yet. Not here. Not with witnesses.

"Now I understand," Hong said quietly, breaking the silence that had stretched too long, "why Lego is still there after everything that's happened."

I looked up at him, confused.

"The fool really knows how to try to apologize." His voice was dry, almost mocking, but I caught the undercurrent of something else. Recognition, maybe. Understanding.

I looked back at the painting.

Part of me was happy. Some deep, hungry part that had waited for acknowledgment, for proof that what we'd had mattered, for evidence that I hadn't imagined the connection.

But another part—the part that had been slowly, painfully learning to heal—felt something else entirely.

Why now?

The question surfaced like something sharp, cutting through the initial wonder.

After everything? After I'd finally stopped checking my phone for messages that never came? After I'd started drinking flower tea instead of bitter coffee, started talking to a therapist about patterns I hadn't known I had, started believing I might be worth something that didn't require earning? Why now, when I was finally getting over a relationship that was never real?

The timing felt deliberate. Or maybe it felt random. Or maybe it felt like the universe's particular cruelty, offering exactly what I'd wanted only after I'd learned to stop wanting it.

I set the painting down carefully, propping it against the wall where it could catch the light. The rose seemed to pulse with color, demanding attention.

The letter waited beside it. Unopened. Full of words I wasn't sure I wanted to read.

My hands were trembling.

"You don't have to open it," Tui said. "Not right now. Not ever, if you don't want to."

I knew that. I knew I had a choice—could put the letter in a drawer, could pretend it didn't exist, could maintain the distance I'd been carefully building for weeks. I didn't owe William anything. I didn't owe him my attention, my forgiveness, my willingness to read whatever words he'd written.

But I also knew that I would open it.

Because I was different now. Because the person I was becoming—the one who went to therapy and watered resurrection plants and let himself be loved by chosen family—that person didn't run from hard things. That person faced them. Processed them. Integrated them into the story instead of pretending they didn't exist.

I opened the letter.

The handwriting was William's—I recognized it immediately, that particular slant, those distinctive loops. But it was steadier than I'd expected. More careful. The handwriting of someone who had thought about every word before committing it to paper.

"You don't have to decide anything right now," Tui said. His voice was gentle, understanding in a way that suggested he'd been watching my face cycle through emotions I couldn't hide. "This is a lot to process."

"It is." I heard my own voice, distant. Like it was coming from somewhere else.

"We can stay if you want," Hong offered. "Or leave. Whatever you need."

I looked at them—these two people who had shown up at my bus stop with coffee, who had filled my apartment with food and conversation and the particular warmth of chosen family. Who were here, present, offering exactly what I needed without requiring me to name it.

And then I looked at the painting. At the flowers. At the letter waiting.

"Stay," I said. "For a while longer. I'm not ready to be alone with this yet."

"Okay." Tui settled back onto the couch, his posture suggesting he'd stay as long as I needed.

"I'll make more tea," Hong said, already moving toward my kitchen. "You have the flower kind, right? The ones Lego gave you?"

"Cabinet above the stove."

He disappeared into the kitchen, and I heard the familiar sounds of water being poured, the click of the electric kettle. Normal sounds. Grounding sounds. The particular music of people taking care of you.

I sat down at my table, the painting in front of me, My hands. Painted by someone who had looked at them carefully enough to remember every detail. Between them, a rose—beautiful and alive and demanding care.

The question wasn't whether to forgive William. That felt too simple, too binary for what had actually happened between us. The question was what to do with this. With the proof that he'd been thinking about me. With the evidence that some part of him had been trying to reach out, even when he couldn't find words. The question was whether to let this change anything.

Felt its weight in my hands. The envelope was thick—multiple pages, probably. Words he'd been saving up, finally ready to be released. Not yet, I decided. Not with Tui on the couch and Hong making tea and the sun still shining through my windows.

Tomorrow.

Or maybe the day after.

Or maybe when I felt ready—really ready—to hear what he had to say.

For now, I set the letter back down. Turned instead toward the tea Hong was bringing, the conversation Tui was gently steering toward safer topics. The simple, present reality of people who had chosen to be here.

The painting watched from its place against the wall. My hands, holding something precious. Maybe that was the real message. Not just the rose, but the gesture itself.

The attempt. The reaching. Maybe William was trying to tell me that I was worth holding onto.

The irony was bitter and sweet at once: I was only just learning to believe that about myself.

And part of me wondered if that belief would survive whatever was waiting in that envelope.

Part of me wondered if I even wanted it to.

"We'll come back." Tui touched my shoulder briefly, a gesture of comfort. "You know we will. But this is something you need to process. In your own time. In your own way."

I nodded, not trusting my voice.

They left quietly, with promises to text later, with reminders that they were just a message away. The door closed behind them, and I was alone.

Alone with the flowers.

Alone with the painting.

Alone with the letter I wasn't ready to read.

I don't know how long I stood there.

The light changed outside my window—afternoon sliding toward evening, the sun moving across the sky in its endless rotation. The flowers released their subtle fragrance into my apartment, filling the space with something foreign and beautiful. The painting watched me with its single red rose, patient and insistent.

And the letter waited.

Eventually, I moved.

Not toward the letter—I still wasn't ready—but toward the resurrection plant on my desk. It was fully green now, fully alive, every leaf unfurled and reaching toward the light. When Lego had given it to me, it had looked dead. A brown husk of something that had given up.

But it hadn't given up. It had just been waiting.

Waiting for someone to add water.

I thought about William in his apartment, surrounded by paintings and silence. About the agoraphobia that kept him trapped, the grief that had broken something in him, the particular devastation of losing the person who'd been his whole world.

He wasn't evil. He wasn't a monster. He was just a person—damaged and struggling and doing his best with broken tools.

That didn't excuse what he'd done. Didn't erase the hurt, the dismissal, the way he'd pushed me away when I'd been trying to help. Didn't undo the night I'd shown up drunk and desperate and humiliated myself completely.

But it did complicate things.